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Central Intelligence Agency



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Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

11 February 1983

Nepal's Prime Minister Thapa: Clinging to Power

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Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa clings to power despite considerable evidence over the past 15 months that King Birendra has been seriously considering replacing him. Although Thapa's February visit to Washington is mainly for health reasons, we believe that his meetings with high-level US officials are designed both to help pave the way for the King's visit later this year and to shore up his own political position in Kathmandu. We expect that royal dissatisfaction with Thapa will ultimately prompt his dismissal but--barring a crisis--not until after the King's visit to the United States.

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There are no outstanding issues between Nepal and the United States. Although Prime Minister Thapa may bring up some substantive issues--such as US aid and Nepal's development of its hydroelectric resources--we expect his visit to be primarily protocitary.

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Birendra. We believe that Thapa [] hopes his meetings with high level US officials could help shore up his political position at home.

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This memorandum was prepared by [] the Office of Near East-South Asia Analysis, South Asia Division, Subcontinent Branch. It was coordinated with the National Intelligence Council and the Directorate of Operations. Questions and comments are welcome and may be directed to the author []

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NESA M 83-10032

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The King and His Prime Minister

Although nominally a constitutional ruler, King Birendra is in reality one of the world's few remaining absolute monarchs. He is commander in chief of the armed forces, and he ultimately guides government policy through the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. The Prime Minister is technically chosen by the National Panchayat (legislature), but the King has considerable leverage. Once elected, the Prime Minister serves at the King's pleasure. [redacted]

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Thapa's Assets and Liabilities

Thapa's most potent political skills are an instinct for survival, a well-honed talent for unscrupulous but effective maneuvering, and a proven ability to exploit the mistakes of his adversaries. He has remained in power despite his almost universal unpopularity in the National Panchayat because he still manages to control the assembly and deliver the votes the King wants. [redacted]

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The Prime Minister's apparent inability to manage the King's economic development efforts may prove his undoing. Thapa's government has promised to tackle Nepal's grave economic problems--including rising prices and severe shortages of basic commodities--but has visibly failed to do so. [redacted]

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Growing Opposition

Although opposition to Thapa's leadership has been growing steadily within the National Panchayat, efforts by its members to isolate and dislodge him have been consistently unsuccessful. In each case, Thapa has deftly sidestepped his critics and has managed to consolidate his own power at their expense.

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The King is aware of Thapa's shortcomings, but despite his displeasure with Thapa's performance he has chosen to retain him. The Prime Minister serves as a useful buffer between the government and the monarchy and could be a useful scapegoat should the King need one. In addition, the King is eager to project a democratic image and to let his new constitution work.

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Outlook

If the government's image and performance do not begin to improve in the next few months, the King may have no choice but to dismiss the Prime Minister and assume a more active role in government. Popular displeasure with Thapa--who we believe is increasingly seen as a creature of the King--has already begun to spill over to the monarchy. [redacted]
serious food shortages in many parts of Nepal last year severely

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tested Thapa's--and by extension the King's--credibility. We believe that retaining Thapa could also increase public cynicism toward the King's economic development and decentralization programs. [redacted]

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In our view, the King is unlikely to remove the Prime Minister until after the royal visit to the United States later this year. [redacted]

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In a crisis, we would expect the King to exercise his constitutional power and remove the Prime Minister through summary action. He could be forced to do so as early as this spring if projected food shortages become more serious than we expect. [redacted]

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SUBJECT: Nepal's Prime Minister Thapa: Clinging to Power [redacted]

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